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ABSTRACT

A new method of rapid low-cost communication between government officials and citizens is proposed and outlined. Relevant facts and opposing views on an issue are sent to citizens, who then have a week to express their opinions by dialing a special televoter number which is different for every citizen. Votes are then counted by computer, and results are reported to officials. Costs are said to be about 25 cents per year per adult resident after installation. A description of a sample used by San Jose, California school district is given, along with detailed information on setting up a system, costs, processing votes, and possible applications by other government agencies. A mailing address for more detailed reports and further information are provided. (SK)

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TeleVote

A New Civic Communication System

by

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WHAT IS TELEVOTE?

A televote system is a convenient way to inform citizens about civic issues and quickly get opinions back from them. It is rapid, low-cost communication between the people and government officials.

People need information and public officials need feedback from the people. The success of government depends both on good decisions and public acceptance. Programs with new ideas are likely to succeed only after people are comfortable with them.

HOW IT WORKS

Relevant facts and opposing views on an issue are sent to all interested citizens who have registered as televoters. They then have a week to express their opinions by dialing certain numbers on the telephone. A computer counts the number of people choosing each opinion, and the results are delivered to public officials and the media a day or so later.

EXAMPLE

Issue:	Which transportation plan will be better for our city? Study the fact sheet. (A page or two of background information describing plans, their costs and supporting facts)
Choose one answer:	
187 Plan A:	(Summary of Plan A and its main advantages)
298 Plan B:	(Summary of Plan B and its main advantages)
319 Other :	If you want to tell us what other plan you prefer, please call 998-2668.

When a televoter has studied the information and chosen an answer, the choice is televoted as follows:

- Dial the phone number of the Televote Center
- Dial own confidential "televoter number," which is different for every person. This assures that only one vote is counted from each person.
- Dial the number beside the answer chosen. In the example above a televoter who chose Plan B would dial 298.

The compu'er counts the number of votes for Plan A, for Plan B, and for "other." It can also give separate results for each part of town, males and females, age groups, and whatever other breakdown is desired.

Government councils, commissions, advisory panels and other citizen groups can use this information immediately in their planning, because the results are available within a day after the televote ends.

Televotes may be used by any kind of government of any size. The cost of a televote is less than any other means of getting feedback from large numbers of citizens--about 25 cents per adult resident per year after installation.

Televoting has been successfully used in a large school district in San Jose, California where several public agencies are now planning to share one system. By sharing they can keep costs low and each agency can still choose its own issues.

WHY PUBLIC AGENCIES ARE INTERESTED

Public agencies are being held increasingly accountable to their constituencies and are seeking ways to be responsive while still making sound decisions in the public interest. To be responsive is to base decisions on accurate knowledge of citizen needs. An efficient means of evaluating people's needs and preferences is necessary. Televoting is a means of achieving this efficiency by providing quick feedback from many people at low cost. Televoting is only one useful way of exchanging ideas with people. It will not replace working committees and public hearings, which are necessary to create good plans and make known various viewpoints. What televotes can do is inform the public and get a quick, accurate appraisal of their informed choices among specific plans, policies, or goals.

In addition, one can test levels of awareness: Do citizens know what officials are planning? Do officials know what citizens want, and what they think of government plans? Attitudes are a crucial ingredient of communication as well: Do citizens feel that public officials want their opinions? Do public officials care about citizen

views? Televotes can assess knowledge and attitudes as well as preferences.

If the public participates in a certain area of planning right from the start they are more likely to get the kind of programs they want. They will also better understand the problems which public officials face. For these reasons, a good civic communication system should both improve government and strengthen public support of public agencies. Over the years, mutual respect and trust between citizens and officials should increase. Because early communication avoids miscalculations of public reaction, there should be fewer failing tax and bond elections. Saving the cost of wasted elections alone might pay the cost of a televote system.

QUALITY OF CITIZEN OPINION

If citizen opinions are to have a beneficial effect on government decisions, they should be well informed and thoughtful. The televote system informs people by giving them summaries of information relevant to the issues, easy access to more detailed information, and time to think the whole matter over before deciding.

Televotes open to all citizens are thus similar to regular elections in which voters are sent carefully prepared arguments on ballot propositions.

Televoting by a preselected representative sample of the community is another use of the system. This use is more similar to scientifically reputable polls which survey a random cross-section of a defined population. An important difference from a typical poll is that the televoter is given a summary of the main background information needed to make a sound judgment, and is given up to a week to think it over and discuss it before reaching a conclusion. Poll respondents, on the other hand, are typically not given advance information to study, but rather are asked to make a quick judgement based on little or no information at a time which may not be convenient.

If televotes were held often and citizens came gradually to realize their impact on public decisions, they might have greater incentive to inform themselves and thus make wiser decisions. Informed or not, their opinions will bear directly on the success of government programs, and therefore should be taken into account by public officials as they make plans.

SETTING UP A TELEVOTE SYSTEM

The Major decisions and tasks of setting up a televote system are each described briefly below:

Governance

The system can be operated by the public agencies which use it, or by a citizen organization created especially for that purpose, or by an independent private organization. In all cases it is important that lay citizens and participating government agencies be adequately represented both in setting policy and defining issues.

Who Selects the Televote Issues

Each participating public agency identifies those issues on which televotes might assist agency policymakers. Examples: Transit routes or service; location of major shopping centers; educational programs; parks acquisition projects; and capital improvements bond elections.

Citizen groups may also initiate issues. The governing body establishes general procedures,

including rules guaranteeing televotes on issues that are requested by a specified minimum number of citizens. A 24-hour hotline is open to receive citizens' issue suggestions. Issues may also come from a citizens' advisory body, set up to monitor issue statements.

How Are Issues Presented

Consultants and staff first research and then draft issue statements. Statements are then referred to officials of the initiating agency for review and confirmation of issue priorities. The citizens' advisory body reviews every issue to see that all major viewpoints are presented fairly and reflect concerns relevant to particular neighborhoods. The final say on wording of an issue, however, lies with the agency which initiated it. Five or six hundred words (two pages) of concise information is a desirable amount for study by televoters. Endorsement by special interest groups, experts, or officials may heighten public interest in an issue.

The final statements are mailed directly to all registered televoters, printed in newspapers, and distributed by various civic and government offices.

Use of Televote Results

Each participating agency publicizes results and includes them in their policy deliberations. Results can be analyzed and the issue restated and returned to televoters for more reaction. A series of such televotes can produce tested and reasoned decisions. Official decisions can be published alongside televote results to show responsiveness or to explain differences.

Who Televotes?

All residents of the community age 12 or older are invited to become televoters. In addition to all voluntary televoters, a representative sample of all segments of the community is asked to televote regularly.

Representative and voluntary samples provide basically different kinds of information, each kind serving somewhat different uses. A voluntary sample will more closely resemble the part of the public which normally votes and participates in civic affairs. A representative sample will describe all types of people in the community, including citizens who do not usually participate.

Getting Citizens Interested

A televote system includes a continuous program to attract citizens of all cultural and socio-economic groups. An aim of the program is to demonstrate how televotes can help minority groups serve their special needs, as well as helping the whole community. Meetings with local and civic groups, newsletters, and mass media presentations are part of the program.

Televoting helps overcome the very low motivation most citizens have to participate in civic matters in the following ways:

- Participation is made easy since people can study the issues and televote from their own homes in a matter of minutes.
- A televoter can influence government decisions directly without have to display the skills of public speaking or letter writing.
- Televoters realize that public officials are asking for their opinions to aid their decisions, and are more likely to have their say if they think someone is listening.
- Televote impact on public decisions is publicized.

- Once registered, televoters are reminded to call in through spot announcements on radio and TV and notices in newspapers.

The televote system allows citizens to choose a level of constructive participation in civic planning suited to their interest in a given issue. Those with much time can play a key role in defining issues, researching them or mobilizing support. Those with little time can make a valuable contribution by studying the alternatives and televoting their preferences.

The percentage of residents who respond initially will likely be small, but can be expected to grow as more citizens perceive the impact of televotes on public decisions. A starting sample of even a few hundred citizens will provide officials far better estimates of informed public opinion than officials usually have. This size sample is also large enough to give reliable results within ± 5%, no matter how large the city is.

Registration of Televoters

In order to be sure only one vote is counted per person, every televoter must be registered and given a unique televoter number which cannot

easily be dialed by chance. Everyone who wishes to become a televoter therefore is registered and given such a number.

Registration forms are published periodically in newspapers and provided to any organization willing to distribute them to community residents. Below is a sample form.

Sample Registration Form

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip _____

Sex o Male
o Female

Age o 12-17
o 18-29
o 30-49
o 50 or over

Registered voter? o Yes
o No

Parent of child under age 18? o Yes
o No

The name and address can be used to verify registration. The other information is used to break down televote results for separate groups.

A person can register by phone or mail at any time and thereby receive a televoter card along with the next televote issue. The card shows instructions on how to televote and the televoter number assigned to that person, as in the sample below:

Sample Televoter Card

To televote: First study the information and choose your answers. Then call 998-1166. As soon as the tone begins, dial your televoter number (below), then dial the answer numbers.

YOUR TELEVOTER NUMBER IS

00-00-00

If you have questions or suggestions, or want a new televoter number, call 998-2668.

Processing Televotes

Televoters may use any telephone. All televote information comes to a single televote center which houses equipment and a hotline operator who uses a conventional telephone to handle inquiries, suggestions and registrations of televoters.

Each incoming telephone line by which televotes are transmitted has a data coupler and decoder to convert dial and touch tone signals to digital information. A small eight-bit computer controls the decoding process and transfers televotes onto paper or magnetic tape through a teletype machine or digital tape recorder. At the end of a televote week all data from the tapes are transmitted by telephone line to a larger computer at a commercial data processing firm where the results are batch processed overnight. There is no permanent record of how a person televoted. At the end of a week when results have been tallied, televotes of individual persons are erased permanently from all records.

COSTS

Initial set-up costs and annual operating costs are estimated below for cities of 50,000 to 500,000 population. Figures are based on actual costs for the San Jose try-out.

Set-Up Costs

Equipment	$ 7,000 - 10,000
System manager (3 mos.)	4,000
Secretary/hotline operator (3 mos.)	2,000
Computer programmer	2,000
Public orientation	4,000
Registrations (12,000 @ $250/1,000)	3,000
Consultants	3,000 - 5,000
Total set-up costs:	$25,000 - $30,000

If the number of registrations rises as high as 50,000, additional one-time set-up costs of about $16,000 would be incurred.

Annual Operating Costs

After set-up is complete, yearly operating costs will vary from approximately 15¢ per capita for a population of 500,000 to 50¢ per capita for a population of 50,000 (assuming 12 televotes yearly).

A breakdown of yearly operating costs is shown below:

	Number of Registered Televoters	
	5,000	50,000
System management	$10,000	$15,000
Hotline operators/ secretaries	8,000	24,000
Equipment maintenance	2,000	3,000
Telephone lines	1,200	4,500
New computer programming	2,000	2,000
New registrations (20% per year)	600	4,000
Print and mail televote information (12 televotes per year)	1,800	16,000
Televote data processing (assume 20% of registrants respond to each issue)	2,400	6,000
Miscellaneous	1,000	2,000
Total Operating Costs Per Year	$29,000	$76,500

If the total system cost is shared by several agencies the annual cost per agency would be:

5 agencies	$5,800	$15,200
10 agencies	2,900	7,600

Costs of Alternative Methods

Once a televote system is set-up and operating, additional televotes cost little. The estimated cost per additional issue (beyond 12) is compared below for televotes and other survey methods.

	No. of Reg. Televoters	
	5,000	50,000
Televote (by telephone-computer)	$ 600	$ 2,000
Mail punch cards	600	5,500
Telephone survey	3,000	27,000
Door-to-door survey	8,000	77,000

The time spent by public officials and citizens defining important problems and formulating televote issues is not considered an added cost of the system. These are functions which need to be performed however civic communication is handled.

THE SAN JOSE TELEVOTE SYSTEM

Televoting was developed and used over a period of one year in the San Jose Unified School District. This initial demonstration was funded by the National Science Foundation. District-wide televoting

went on for seven months during the 1973-74 school year. A committee of students, staff, parents and others met weekly to decide communication priorities. Others could suggest additional issues or answers by calling a special hotline.

When the committee had stated the issues well and fairly, information was mailed to all televoters and given to the media. Potential televoters were required to register by phone, by mail or by returning forms to a school. Registrations were solicited mainly through school newsletters and occasional public service announcements on radio and TV. Every person who registered received a unique televoter number and brief instructions on how to televote.

During the seven months there were nine televotes which included 30 specific questions about 14 issues. One of the briefer issues is shown below:

LEARNING OUTSIDE SCHOOL

In some communities high school students are getting part of their instruction outside the school building. Examples: learning as they work at a regular job; field trips; helping with a community project; tutoring younger children; observing and participating in local government; study in a museum or gallery; developing a skill or craft not offered at school. The extra costs of such programs often include transportation, insurance, special consultants, equipment and supplies. The gains or savings sometimes include freed classroom space and the services of volunteers. How much do you think the high schools should involve students in out-of-school learning activities? (Choose one answer)

859 Quite a lot. Experience in the outside world should be a large part of high school education for all students. It could prepare students for a career and for adult life. They may find such activities more interesting and therefore learn more. If their work is useful, students may feel more like worthwhile members of the community.

961 Very little. Students should spend nearly all school time in school. Films, guest speakers, laboratories, and other experience in school can bring the real-life element into learning more efficiently. Out of school learning is harder to control and coordinate so that students really learn from it.

313 Other.

A three digit number was printed beside each alternative answer, plan or policy. A televoter studied the alternatives, then indicated his or her preference by calling the televote line, dialing his or her own televoter number, and dialing the numbers beside the answer preferred. Televotes were processed by computer, and all information from an individual was kept confidential.

Results of the televote were given to all interested individuals and groups and to the media a day or so later. Televote counts were broken down by school area, sex and other group differences as will be shown later for the vocational school issue.

SAN JOSE RESULTS

Televote results were used in four educational decisions, particularly in the choice of new courses for a three million dollar program of the Regional Vocational Center. The courses corresponded closely to the preferences of televoters.

Over 5,500 persons voluntarily registered as televoters (total population of the district is approximately 180,000 persons), and most of these participated in one or more televotes. An average of about 700 persons voted on a given issue. This rate of participation is better than usually received by traditional methods. Yet the potential number of citizens who might participate is much greater. Participation in the televote system led to greater awareness of school issues and better relations between citizens and the school district, according to survey results.

All groups questioned about the value of televoting evaluated the system favorably on the whole. Half of the random sample of San Jose citizens surveyed said they would be willing to pay at least 25 cents per year, the amount needed to operate a televote system. Apparently most residents who are told about televoting think it has value for the community and are willing to pay the small cost of operation.

ILLUSTRATION OF TELEVOTE USE

Following is a description of how educators used televote to plan a new program for the San Jose

Regional Vocational Center.

The Regional Vocational Center prepares high school juniors and seniors to enter certain occupations after graduation or to continue in more advanced occupational training beyond high school. The Center serves thirty high schools in six different school districts in the greater San Jose area. Students attend the Center half the day and their regular high school the other half.

Demand for vocational education has been increasing for several years in the San Jose area. As a result, the Center planned to expand their program of offerings from thirteen occupational areas to eighteen or nineteen. Since the number of occupational areas in which new courses might be offered is very large, narrowing the selection down to those few which would be of greatest advantage to students and the community was an important and difficult decision. Center staff began with a survey of industry to determine the marketability of graduates in each occupational area. This narrowed the choice down to fourteen occupational courses for which job prospects looked good in the near future.

Next a survey of sophomore high school students was conducted to determine student preferences among these areas. The major gap in knowledge at this point was information as to the preferences of parents and other adult citizens.

In mid-October 1973 the Center director found the planning process to be in a typical time bind: more information needed but too little time to get it. It was important from the standpoint of funding and community support that the new program offerings be in active operation by September 1974. In order to provide adequate time for course preparation, the decision as to which courses would be offered needed to be made in early December 1973. This left little time to plan, conduct, analyze and report a survey carried out by conventional means.

At this point the director proposed a televote to learn adult preferences among the vocational course offerings. Within three weeks a televote issue on vocational courses had been reviewed and approved by the issues committee and mailed out to televoters. The information given to televoters stated the purposes of the Center, its current courses, and the fourteen possible new courses with a brief description

of each course. Televoters then selected up to five courses which they thought should be offered. By the third week in November the televote had been completed and the results tallied by computer and delivered to the director of the Center. A partial summary of the televote results is shown below.

On the basis of these results and the earlier 10th grade survey, the Center staff recommended to the participating school districts that six new courses be offered. (Data processing; air-conditioning and refrigeration mechanics; medical office and related services; industrial plastics; advanced secretarial; and heavy dute equipment mechanics.) As can be seen in the table, the six courses recommended included four of the five courses most preferred by televoters.

Since these results correspond with student preferences, it was evident to both the Center staff and the school boards that the courses recommended had the support of the adults of the community as well as students. The courses recommended were unanimously approved by the six participating school districts.

Percent of Televoters Choosing Each Course

Course	All Tele-voters	Males	Fem-ales	Par-ents	Students JrH	Students HS
Air cond. & refrig. mech	33%	42%	28%	39%	22%	19%
Heavy equip. mechanic	27%	34%	23%	29%	22%	29%
Hydraulic technician	26%	31%	23%	25%	31%	34%
Industrial plastics	29%	34%	26%	31%	28%	22%
Serv. station operator	21%	21%	21%	17%	22%	39%
Small engine repair	32%	33%	31%	31%	34%	20%
Welding fabricator	24%	28%	21%	28%	20%	20%
Data pro-cessing	58%	60%	57%	62%	51%	53%
Telephone communications	38%	37%	39%	34%	46%	58%
Secretarial, advanced	46%	38%	51%	46%	53%	37%
Dietitian aide	22%	13%	27%	23%	20%	15%
Medical office	46%	36%	52%	42%	55%	49%
Nursery school aide	29%	21%	34%	28%	24%	32%
Community health aide	32%	27%	36%	32%	29%	34%
TOTAL NUMBER OF TELEVOTES	728	291	434	266	97	79

IF YOU WANT TO EXPLORE TELEVOTE FURTHER:

Based on the initial San Jose tryout and work sessions with several public agencies, Tel vote, we believe, is a workable, economical and effective communication system. There are many ways to adapt a televote system to particular communities. Please contact us to discuss how televoting may fit the needs of your community or government, and how you might implement a televote system.

A detailed report (The Televote System for Civic Communication: First Demonstration and Evaluation) is available on request describing the San Jose tryout and evaluation.

For further information contact:

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